

## Painting as Part of Multiple Strategies

It is tempting to look into some of the choices of many painters of Hong Kong, such as the way they represent very personal memories belonging to this place and its culture,<sup>1</sup> to the expectations of the Post-'80s in Hong Kong, a generation of cultural and political activists who are trying to preserve their birthplace from the destructive impact of big business, including the land developers of Hong Kong, who have been responsible for the destruction of a large part of the architectural heritage of the former colony, and the growing influence of mainland China in the political affairs of the SAR. In that sense, there is no pursuit of a cultural identity in "nice painting," a term coined by Robin Peckham and Venus Lau to criticize a certain practice of painting characteristic of a younger generation of Hong Kong artists whom they considered to be quite superficial,<sup>2</sup> its practitioners having no doubt as to who they are and what their role must be in the society they live in. On the other hand, some of the choices made by a more mature artist could be related, with little effort, to the quest for cultural identity many practitioners who lived parts of their lives outside Hong Kong have been pursuing. Donning the identity of a painter is still a viable strategy for many Hong Kong artists, even though it is often seen as a strange, old-fashioned one by many artists outside Hong Kong and China at large. Many European artists visiting or residing in Hong Kong often show disdain for painting and are quite startled by the presence of so much of it. Even Choi Yuk-kuen, who studied for a master of fine arts in London, turned toward video and

body art for a time, no longer understanding what she considers to be the conservatism of the students in her alma mater. How much the approach of artists is conditioned by the choices available in their early art education is obviously the subject of intense deliberation, and is all the more important because of questions around the very notion of individuality and originality that are still central to art education in many institutions around the world.

All the same, there are many artists in Hong Kong who are still so attached to the identity of being a painter that they restrict all their activities to it, while many others are no longer satisfied with the practice of painting alone, as we have just seen. The struggle to keep a viable art practice in the domain of painting for artists using Chinese media, like the kind of brush and ink employed by the literati of the past, one that could be identified as contemporary, is not as pressing as for those using media like oil or acrylic. The question of whether it is viable for contemporary artists to restrict themselves to the practice of painting becomes even more pressing at a time when Hong Kong artists are starting to enjoy much wider recognition. The painters discussed in this section have chosen not to restrict themselves to painting. In the end, all motivations for exploring new ways to be a plastician are beneficial. These motivations spring from conflicting desires: a desire for more visibility in the new globalized art market of Hong Kong and the desire to explore personal or public issues.

In the SAR, where painters from mainland China in any media, from ink to acrylic and oil, have been visible for a long time (let us remember that Johnson Chang at the Hong

Kong-based gallery Hanart TZ was already promoting this art in the mid-1980s), there is still a strong attraction to painting for local artists, an attraction that might eventually be reinforced by the active art market that has descended upon the territory in the last few years. As the history of any booming art market has repeatedly shown, painting is always attractive, since its commodification is so easy to establish. This is not a criticism of the choice to paint or of the choices made by collectors, gallery managers, and auction houses: painting is just as good a choice as any other, and supporting it is a matter of personal taste. All the same, the recent rise of Hong Kong as the third largest art auction market in the world (very far behind New York and London though), the establishment in the Central District of commercial galleries from New York (Gagosian), London (Ben Brown Gallery, White Cube), and Paris (Galerie Perrotin)—where painting generally occupies a very prominent place as the easiest kind of commodity—has not influenced local artists into submitting to anything else but the internal requirement of their own art practices. Of course, that these galleries are more interested in showing mainland painters than local practitioners, with only a few exceptions like Chow Chun Fai and Lam Tung-pang, might also very well be another reason why local artists do not feel the need to adapt to the demands of these important art exhibitors by limiting their production to painting. Most of these galleries, and the departments of auction houses specializing in contemporary art, were drawn to the SAR for two reasons we have seen already: Chinese and local collectors are starting to buy contemporary art from around the world and artworks exported

from Hong Kong are not taxed. But these institutions can also be active promoters of other forms of art creation than the nonperishable, easy to commodify, objects they have been exhibiting over the last decade in their Hong Kong branches. When they are not obsessively selling commodities, we can hope that they will start looking at local practitioners and the variety of their art practices to present them as individuals just as worthy of attention as their mainland counterparts.

### *Painting and Textual Strategy*

A characteristic of literati painting has been to integrate text and images into a whole. The notion that painting and calligraphy come from the same source has often even bordered on the feeling that both expressions are the same, a feeling reinforced by the fact that both are made possible by this almost magical tool of literati thinking, the brush and ink. Integrating text and images has therefore always been an obvious choice for artists who identify themselves as traditionalists, a practice that every conservative nativist will indulge in without any self-doubt. Practitioners of forms originating in Euro-America, and in particular image-making using oil or acrylic on canvas, will not have such a clear-minded relationship with this type of integration, especially if they look at their painting practice as an inheritor of the modernist tradition, exemplified for instance by Clement Greenberg, and its desire to purify the medium. In that context, creating narratives with painting becomes problematic, and even more so using words with images (we have seen how horizontality and verticality produced profoundly different

perception in the Euro-American tradition). In the art history of Euro-American painting, the relationship of drawing and color also has been anything but straightforward and the history of the long theoretical battles of the first Academy of Painting in Paris, opposing in the seventeenth century the defenders of drawing against the defenders of color, endured in various forms until the romantic period (the conflict opposing Delacroix and Ingres was based on the same dichotomy). The relationship between drawing and painting, between text and images was at the heart of a series of exhibitions organized by the small gallery AM Space (run by the same team that publishes the art magazine *AM Post*) during the year 2014.

During discussions that took place on these occasions, the question of what drawing actually is was often raised. It seemed not to be such a difficult question to answer, but it turns out that, when confronted with a related question like “What is painting?,” the answer was far from straightforward, especially at a time when issues about the nature and validity of painting as an art form have returned with urgency. The reader should remember that the death of painting had been announced by the conceptual artists of the 1970s who felt, in their political and social engagement, that an image hanging on a wall could no longer address vital issues like the ones they were dealing with. This, of course, begs the question of the nature of the image, an issue so complex that entire books have been written about it (such as James Elkins and Maja Naef’s *What Is an Image?*), and quite recently so, without having been able to satisfactorily answer the question outside the specialized domain of professional—read “academic”—philosophy.<sup>3</sup> After

the meteoric development of conceptual art in Europe and North America in the 1970s, animated by questionings about the value or absence of value of any art form that could so smugly fit the demands of a money-guided art market, the backlash of the money-obsessed 1980s, dominated by the figures of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, led to a renewal of painting: mostly guided by art dealers who wanted to have something to sell in their galleries once again, such movements as *transavanguardia* in Italy, the new *fauves* in Germany, and *Bad Painting* in the United States restored to painting practices the recognition they had briefly lost (this is no condemnation of the aesthetic value of these art practices, as much as I do not think Julian Schnabel, born 1951, is a very valuable painter—his movies are wonderful, some of them at least—some of the German painters were really excellent, for example, A. R. Penck, 1939–2017). Since then, painting as an art form and an art practice has hovered between critical doubts and market success. With the exception of many mainland Chinese artists of the 1990s and 2000s, whose fame relied almost exclusively on how painting can be marketed successfully (and once again, this is no criticism of their aesthetic values), the painters of the world have tried very hard to turn their practice into something more than just painting: I suppose the most famous and interesting example would be Gerhard Richter (born 1932), whose painting are just as much questionings on the nature of this art form as they are simple images made with paint on canvas.

In this context, the relationship between drawing and painting becomes an issue that needs to be resolved at the level of praxis: if

visitors to the gallery do not necessarily ask themselves the question, the practitioner often wants to elucidate what unifies and separates them. In so many words, it comes out in the form of simple questions whose answers are far from simple: What did I do to obtain that image? Where does the painting stop and drawing start (and vice versa)? And so on. There is no real end to the stream of questions one can ask here. Over the years, Francis Yu Wai Luen 余偉聯 (born 1963) developed a strategy of questioning the nature of painting that led him very naturally to address the issue of drawing. The series of exhibitions AM Space organized on the topic of drawing was therefore a perfect opportunity to fit his own interrogations into a practical setting, and the fact that the space gave him an entire week to set up the show allowed him to ask and ask again the questions with each set of images and objects. His exhibition at AM Space was titled *Contextual Drawing: Close to Poem · Close to Song* and was a reflection based on a life-long research of the artist into the very validity of painting in plastician art practices.

It was during his student years in London, when he read *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy* by the very influential art historian Michael Sullivan,<sup>4</sup> that Francis Yu realized how little he knew about Chinese art and literature. This elegantly written and rather slim volume emphasizes the importance of the interconnectedness of these three art forms in Chinese literati culture, and especially how they are felt to be more than just identical but really originating from the same source. The first reaction of Yu to the addition of text in images, so visibly present in Chinese painting, was to wonder about its necessity. Raised

in the UK art education system of the 1980s, in the belief of the independence of various art forms (a remnant of the modernist/formalist approach of art critics like Clement Greenberg and even the early Michael Fried, born 1939), Yu is nowadays surprised at his own reaction, feeling that a Chinese should have been able to just accept the way the literati of the past integrated the “three perfections.” But immediately after reacting thus, he also realized that there was no reason to reject that possibility. The interaction between text and image actually opened up new horizons for him. More interestingly, he did not stop at wanting to integrate text and image in his own work but also started to reflect on the relationship of image and object, a strategy he has pursued in his own art practice ever since.

Of all the works on display, the one I could immediately identify as one of his works was made up of a large painted canvas leaning on the wall, supported by two books and complemented with a fluorescent light leaning on the border of the canvas. Titled *Moonlight Before My Bed* (Figure 5.1), it is an homage to the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai 李白 (701–762). (Francis Yu is still planning on doing an entire show on his own readings of Li Bai; this exhibition gave him the opportunity to show this one work.) The poem in question, “Quiet Night Thinking,” is so famous that even I, with my limited ability to communicate in Chinese, can recite it by heart in Putonghua: “Moonlight before my bed, I wonder if there is frost on the ground. I raise my head and look out to the mountain moon; I lower my head and think of my faraway home.” The two books supporting the canvas are the entire works of Li Bai; the painting is of a curtain, the kind that would hang from the bed

where the poet is thinking (Francis Yu looked on the Internet for examples of how drapery is painted in the European paintings of the past); the fluorescent light gives off the sort of soft greenish light one could associate with moonlight. This setting allows for a reflection on the limits of painting, how it interacts with subject matter and the real world of objects. This particular work, where the recourse to canvas would still make viewers think of “painting,” is, however, also establishing the link between what the artist has been pursuing over the years and the reflection on the nature of drawing specific to this exhibition and the series of such shows initiated by AM Space. It also opens the door to the other works where the issues raised in the title of the show are also explored.

If poetry is important to Francis Yu, songs (in the sense of popular songs) are just as important because they illustrate important moments of one’s life (we have seen how this was also true for a more conservative Chinese painter like Chui Pui Chee). Both English and Cantonese pop music have been important to Yu and several of the works on display are related to personal memories of such music. One work is simply titled *Danny Chan and Joni Mitchell* (Danny Chan Bak-keung 陳百強 being a local pop singer who dramatically passed away in 1993 at the age of 35). *In the Water Center* is a title derived from a 1980s song by Cantopop singer George Lam Chi Cheung 林子祥. Joni Mitchell again is reminisced in the work *I’ve Looked at Clouds from Both Sides Now*. Even I know that *Close to You* is also the title of a song by the Carpenters, but Francis Yu also added that, without the “o,” “close to you” becomes “close to Yu,” the artist’s surname. (He knew of the song because of his years of study

in England; I know about it because I generally only watch the English channels of Hong Kong television: the Carpenters are pretty much unknown in France.) Most of these drawings, made with pencil or ballpoint pen, are of very personal moments in the life of the artist, such as a self-portrait made during a sleepless night in Thailand. Francis Yu told me of the circumstances under which this drawing came to be, sitting down at the dresser while his wife was asleep, she first thought it did not look like her husband very much until he added the glasses. This seems also to be a reflection on the flexibility of the drawing medium, when drawing is often considered a preparatory work (a survival of the idea of the sketch, so central to classical art in Euro-America), painting is generally thought to be the more demanding, and definitive, form of the thinking leading to the creation of an image.

The most complex set of drawing/images and objects occupied the floor of the gallery and also represented one of these very personal experiences. The artist enjoys washing his car himself because it gives him the opportunity to pour water on his feet outdoors, a pleasurable experience that is available to very few people in the super-urban environment of Hong Kong. This experience led to the creation of several drawings on recycled cardboard, boxes that always seem to be around in the homes of Hong Kong (probably because we are very often on the move around here, changing apartments much more frequently than anyone would in Europe, where it seems necessary to keep the packaging of all the bulky stuff we buy). One of these drawings on cardboard boxes looks like a bucket of water and the other portrays the feet of the artist, all made with a very rough rendering of blacks and



**Figure 5.1** Francis Yu Wai Luen, *Moonlight Before My Bed* 床前明月光, 2014. Charcoal and fixative on canvas with books and green fluorescent light, 200 cm × 150 cm. (Photo courtesy of the artist).



**Figure 5.2** Francis Yu Wai Luen, *But Seldom Have People Been as Relaxed as Us* 但少閑人如吾兩人耳, 2014. Acrylic and colored pencil on paper with mooncake box cover, 70 cm × 60 cm. (Photo courtesy of the artist).

whites. A plastic stool, of the kind someone like me would always associate with the region (I have never seen anything like that in Europe, or at least never for sitting down—it seems to lead to a vaguely supportive form of squatting) and something looking like car headlights complete the installation. A very narrative rendering of a personal experience, even though it does not look like what Francis Yu has been doing for many years (generally taking the shape of a canvas supported by objects), it nonetheless relies on his own practice of bringing together images and things: the difference here being that the images are more clearly the product

of practices geared toward drawing rather than painting.

I will conclude my discussion of Francis Yu with another work related to the poetry of a great Chinese writer. With the addition of a simple object, Yu still made of this setting a very personal pursuit. *But Seldom Have People Been as Relaxed as Us* is a visual variation on a text by the Song dynasty writer Su Dongpo (**Figure 5.2**): “On the night of the twelfth of October in the sixth year of the Yuanfeng reign, I took off my clothes to sleep. As moonlight flooded the room, I got up at its beckoning and ventured out. For someone to share the fun, I proceeded to Cheng Tian



Temple to look for Zhang Huaimin. Huaimin, too, had yet to retire for the night, and together we went to the center courtyard. Down there, the yard glittered bright as if from pools of water crisscrossed with aquatic plants, which turned out to be shadows of bamboos and cypresses. Was there ever a night without a moon, or any place without bamboos and cypresses? But seldom have people been as relaxed as us.” One would be hard-pressed to find a direct visual narrative of this text in the assemblage on the wall, even though everything here revolves around the Mid-Autumn Festival and the moon. Instead of a straightforward representation of the activities of the festival as they would spring to mind in reading a poem written in the twelfth century, the sheet of paper was used to draw, with acrylic and colored pencils, a set of barbecue ribs, because that would be the sort of food commonly consumed during the moon festival in Hong Kong. To reminisce about the shining moon, the artist associated with this image the lid of a tin of biscuits, of the kind flooding the supermarkets of Hong Kong during the festival period: its shiny surface instantly reminding viewers of memories, many of them from childhood, of this very important moment of the year for all the Chinese. Even though the drawing of ribs has some of the disturbing qualities of a Francis Bacon (1909–1992) painting, this ensemble of images is actually hilarious and shows how light-hearted Francis Yu’s exhibition was meant to be. Light-heartedness was also everywhere present in the major exhibition of Lee Kit organized by M+ for its first participation in the Venice Biennale in 2013, an event we have already mentioned. More than for any of the plasticians already mentioned in this chapter,

the very idea of painting, although still present, gets undermined in a very productive way by the installation of Lee Kit.

### *Painting as Part of Multiple Strategies: When Painting Disappears Altogether*

Organized by *Mobile M+* with members of its own curatorial team, the exhibition of Lee Kit’s work was presented in the brochure of the exhibition as “an expanded adaptation of ‘*You (you)*.’ – *Lee Kit* . . . This reconfigured exhibition fuses aspects of the personal, the social and the political within Lee’s continuous interest in the realm of the everyday.” In addition to a beautifully crafted catalogue tracing Lee’s career and his earlier projects but also the development of his Venice Biennale project, a set of excellent handouts also came with the project, ample proof of the ambition of M+ to fully support this endeavor: a large leaflet commemorating the Venice Biennale show, with photos and texts, and a smaller leaflet specifically printed for this exhibition at Cattle Depot Artist Village with all the information needed to see the “mis-guided” tours organized with some of Lee Kit’s friends (several visits with artist friends of Lee: one with Lam Tung-pang; another with Ho Sin Tung 何倩彤 and Kong Chun Hei 鄺鎮禧; and a third with Anthony Yung 翁子健, senior researcher at the Asia Art Archive). The brochure also advertises screenings and talks: one with Amy Cheng 鄭慧華, in which Lee Kit talks about “the notion of telling lies in relation to the broader social and political contexts,” and another with the film critic Ka Ming 家明. The most exciting handout was, however, a sort of sketchbook + photo album + journal where Lee Kit provided